MYSTERY
Ephesians 3:7-12
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We know very little, actually. We know what we can see and touch and hear and feel. We know what we can weigh and measure and analyze and compute. That about which we are absolutely certain is restricted by objective criteria; by our own sense, and by the scientific method.

The past, of course, presents problems. All the primary data is gone. In order to believe that an incident happened in the past you have to place your trust in something. In the newspapers, for instance; in history books; and ultimately in the oral histories by which people preserve their stories - cultural, national, and personal. And it is there, sometimes, that the truth - what actually happened - becomes a little fragile. When families tell their own stories, the wonderful funny incidents from their own stories, the wonderful funny incidents from their own past, a little exaggeration is allowed. National and cultural heroes often grow larger than life in the telling and retelling of their stories. More than one major league pitcher has proven that Washington surely didn't throw a silver dollar across the Potomac. Our ability to know is dependent on our choices of who to trust to tell us the truth.

Part of being a Christian is to trust that the church, over the centuries, and its book - the Bible - will tell us the truth. As is the case with any family retelling its story, the Bible can be a little foggy on some of the details. Maybe there weren't quite that many Phillistines slain in battle! But the incidents are not fabricated. There is truth in them. Furthermore, there is truth about God and ourselves in them.

We know very little about those strange characters from the East. Their story is in Matthew's account of the nativity and, of course, they are further remembered in song, custom, literature. It is there, in the literary ornamentation, that they have received much of their character. Even their names - even their number is not available in the text. Yet their literary image is rich.

T. S. Eliot wrote wonderfully about them:

"A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of the year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter...
A hard time we had of it.
At the end we preferred to travel all night,
Sleeping in snatches,
With the voices singing in our ears, saying
That this was all folly."

Then, after the meeting with Herod and after visiting the Christ child, they start back...

"We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods."

What we know is that word Magi is very old: that it referred originally to a tribe of priests in the ancient Persian Empire who were regarded as seers, magicians and healers. Historians tell us that later Magi knew a lot about astronomy, and they devised a kind of religion based on their observations, not unlike modern astrology.

So they had seen something, the convergence of Jupiter and Saturn, for instance, that occurred three times in the year 7 B.C. Watching carefully every night - they concluded that something great was about to happen. And so they set out - following that new star they had observed.

Their story is intriguing. And one of the things it teaches us, is that there are large areas of history - large areas of human life - about which we cannot be entirely objective. The Magi teach us the reality and importance of mystery.

Our religion sometimes becomes very rational. We want it that way. We are not comfortable with superstition, with assertions that defy logic and don't make sense. Ever since the human race discovered logic it has been suspicious of anything that doesn't fit into the system - often with good reason.

And yet, some of the truth of our faith seems to get lost when we eliminate all the mystery. The late Karl Rahner was one of the most brilliant theologians of our era. He suggested in an essay that to know God in any sense of the word one must come to terms with mystery. Rahner wrote, "In the midst of the common-sense, everyday movement of life, we are constantly faced with the mystery which is infinite, nameless." (Meditations on Hope and Love, p. 67)

Christian Century recently included an article by Reinhold Niebuhr that had never been published before. The great scholar had written it after suffering a stroke, in the midst of trying to live a radically altered life. One of the big changes was that he was no longer lecturing and preaching every Sunday, and had to go to church as a worshipper. It wasn't easy for him. He wrote:

> "As I became a pew worshipper rather than the preacher, I had some doubts about the ability of us preachers to explicate and symbolize this majesty and mystery (of God). These pulpit-centered churches of ours without a prominent altar, seemed insufficient...I envied the popular Catholic mass because that liturgy, for many, expresses the mystery which makes sense out of life always threatened by meaninglessness." (Christian Century, 12/26/84, p. 119)

"Mystery that makes sense out of life." A peculiar thing for the scholar to say. And yet one of the horrors of Orwell's 1984 was that the mystery and poetry and music and romance were all gone. Einstein agreed, by the way. He wrote, "The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger; who can no longer pause to wonder, and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed."

Certainly the better part of our humanity is something less than logical. Where did the passion come from when Van Gogh painted or Mozart composed? M. Scott Peck, in a book everybody has been reading, The Road Less Traveled, talks about love and observes very sagely: "When my beloved stands before me...there is a feeling throughout me of awe. Simple hunger would be enough to propagate the species. Why awe? Why should sex be complicated by reverence?" (p. 181)

Beauty, passion, love, heroism - none fit very neatly into logical, rational categories. Neither, it seems, will religion. At the heart it is about mystery. Thus St. Paul, our first systematic theologian, looking back at the whole incredible story - and the equally incredible drama of his own life time, lived in the service of Jesus Christ, could write about "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things."

The birth of Jesus is about the mystery of God's plan for the whole creation. It is more than a tender birth story. It contains God's will for the whole project.

It has in it the mystery somehow of God's intent for you and me. That's what T. S. Eliot meant writing about the Magi never again content with their old lives. There is mystery in this birth that changes all the rules, that reshapes the future, that challenges everything about us. Let the Magi remind us of that dimension of the faith this morning. As we remove the wreaths and take down the trees, and put all the beauty on the shelf for another year, as we return to these kingdoms, may we hear again the mystery of the ages hidden in the very heart of God. Throughout the year, may we not see a starry sky without remembering, or a new born baby, or feel deep love, or experience grand passion.

Thomas Torrence, Scottish theologian at the University of Edinburgh, was on Christmas holiday with his family. They stopped at an observatory the day before Christmas, looked at the giant telescope and learned about all the wonderful things astronomers know. That night, Christmas Eve, they went to church. Torrence reflected:

> "I could not get out of my mind the immensities of the cosmos (the telescope) had opened up for me. Then it broke in on me with an excitement I have never lost, that in this infant Jesus, born of Mary, there had come among us none other than the creator of that immeasurable universe, before whom all the galaxies of stars were so to speak, like specks of dust in the palm of his hand. It was here at Bethlehem, not at the observatory...that we are in touch with the secrets of the universe." (Presbyterian Outlook, 12/11/78)

So let us remember, again, in song and sacrament, the mystery of Word made flesh, of love incarnate, of God among us. Amen.